



CRAIG HICKMAN 2022-08-29

## THE NECROPHILIC WORLD: DEATH-DRIVE, CAPITALISM, AND OUR POSTHUMAN FUTURE

ALL, PHILOFICTION BAUDRILLARD, DEATH DRIVE, MACHINES, PESSIMISM, TECHNOLOGY

*'In a system that orders you to live and to capitalize life, the death drive is the only alternative.'*

—Jean Baudrillard

*'The zeroing of death amounts to the death of death. It is for this reason that the atheist can come to sound so very celebratory and evangelical, as they become joyous in their mourning of an end that had for so long successfully eluded truth.'*

—Gary J. Shipley, *Stratagem of the Corpse: Dying*  
with Baudrillard, *a Study of Sickness and Simulacra*

Strange how many people fear machinic life. Our posthuman life in the coming centuries will become more and more immersed in technology to the point that some techno-visionaries envision humanity merging in one form or another with our machines. Looking at Byung-Chul Han's fear of technology portrayed in *Capitalism and the Death Drive* is telling. Here he quotes Erich Fromm cyborgization as Death-in-life:

*"The world becomes a sum of lifeless artifacts; from synthetic food to synthetic organs, the whole man becomes part of the total machinery that he controls and is simultaneously controlled by. . . . He aspires to make robots as one of the greatest achievements of his technical mind, and some specialists assure us that the robot will hardly be distinguished from living men. This achievement will not seem so astonishing when man himself is hardly distinguishable from a robot. The world of life has become a world of 'no-life'; persons have become 'nonpersons,' a world of death. Death is no longer symbolically expressed by unpleasant-smelling feces or corpses. Its symbols are now clean, shining machines. Undead, death-free life is reified, mechanical life. Thus, the goal of immortality can only be achieved at the expense of life."*

Like Ernest Becker and his notions of death-denial and the immortalization of humanity in becoming machinic beings merging with our technology all these critics seem to fear what may be inevitable. The only driver here for me is will it remain within the capitalist order of inequality in which notions of 'enhancement' skew our sense of society creating another Have and Have Not transhumanist civilization in which the rich and powerful once again horde all these advanced technologies for themselves while excluding the rest of humanity? Or will we create a more egalitarian society in which partnership with technology is available to all humans? Will we continue down the path of domination, control, and mastery or create a sharing and cooperative world based on trust? Is techno-sapiens future going to become other than the same old politics of power with its attendant divisiveness and warlike strategies of domination or something else?

Han assumes that the system of economics and the underlying technology and sciences of transhumanism are leading us to create a world-wide necropolis – an antiseptic space of death, cleansed of human sounds and smells. Life processes are transformed into mechanical processes. The total adaptation of human life to mere functionality is already a culture of death. As a consequence of the performance principle, the human being ever more closely approximates a machine, and becomes alienated from itself. Dataism and artificial intelligence reify thinking. Thinking becomes calculating. Living memories are replaced with machine memories. Only the dead remember everything. Server farms are places of death. We bury ourselves alive in order to survive. In the hope of survival, we accumulate dead value, capital. The living world is being destroyed by dead capital. This is the death drive of capital. Capitalism is ruled by a necrophilia that turns living beings into lifeless things. (9)

For Han and Baudrillard the death-drive at the heart of our present civilization and culture have

led to acts of terror. He sees terrorism not as a counter-image to the capitalist system, but as a phenomenon that is symptomatic of that system. The brutality and emotional coldness of the suicide bomber reflect the brutality and coldness of capitalist society. (10) He sees the terrorist as the ultimate capitalist, a narcissist whose self-expansive psychopathic tendencies for exhibitionist self-exposure and a warped sense of artistic authenticity bring about apocalypse, death, and doom. "Eroticism gives the self its death. Death is a losing oneself-in-the-other that puts an end to narcissism." (12) Becoming machine, merging with our technology, the cyborgization of humanity offered on the altar of necrophilic capitalism becomes the end of human desire and the beginning of a new kind of pleasure-pain.

In his book on Baudrillard *Stratagem of the Corpse: Dying with Baudrillard, a Study of Sickness and Simulacra*, Gary J. Shipley suggests that our entry into the process of cyborgization is a form of unlife and a new regime of securitization against death:

*The zeroing of death amounts to the death of death. It is for this reason that the atheist can come to sound so very celebratory and evangelical, as they become joyous in their mourning of an end that had for so long successfully eluded truth. With the truth of zero in place there is no more culture of death, only death itself and death as nothing, but this is no effortful disaster but instead a far more excessive peculiarization of death, providing all the formerly absent truth with no possibility of consequence, 11 because to describe something (a future self) in purely negative terms, and more specifically to engage in the apophysis of death, is to relinquish care not for the thing itself but more importantly for the circumstantial detail of that thing, and thereby escape in life what can no longer be congruous to it. The death of death is the release of an end without ever having to confront it. Death is killed, embalmed and so neutralized. ... The introduction of this nothing-as-nucleus both places and displaces us in the eventuality of death, the carcass of death flayed and twisted into a Möbius strip. The dead body is a maze. We get lost there. We codify death and then kill death. We get lost in the death of death. We feel safe there, in our already being dead: 'This is the secret of security, like a steak under cellophane: to surround you with a sarcophagus in order to prevent you from dying.'*<sup>2</sup>

The sarcophagus is of course the robotic bodies, the metallic flesh or virtual matrix of our new life as we enter the undying repetition of a life-without-death in a necrophilic world.

Consequently, humans who are at the more utopian and complex end of the technosphere are forever flirting with the idea of their technologies becoming integrated with their bodies and brains to an extent of complete interdependence. Conversely, those at the more apocalyptic end of the spectrum have a dread and fear of being fully integrated with their machines and becoming slaves to them and/or to the masters of the machines. Humans who have the power to do so appear to be more than willing to walk up to the line but generally do not cross it. In the 'happier' places within the complex technosphere, we see endless populations of digital zombies armed with phones, pads and laptops, permanently at work—either intentionally and directly working in the virtual marketplace in order to survive or working unintentionally by doing 'recreational' personal and social data entry for corporations and security agencies. Fortunately

for them, they can still unplug at the end of the day. Those caught in the manufacturing and service hells of the global order such as call centres, data entry centres and digital sweatshops also remain attached to their machines but are recognized less as humans and more as necessary parts of a greater machine.<sup>3</sup>

As we become more integrated into technology our civilization enters a more technocratic form of governance. The technocratic solution to necropolitics is one of transformation—an avoidance in which humans can at least pretend to be beyond death. This refusal, combined with a belief that the market and accelerated technological development will also provide protection from human misdeeds and public policy errors, allows questions over the environment to be avoided. According to such dystopian thought the world will be a better place the sooner it becomes a fully engineered and managed environment. Transhumanists would prefer that madcap ideas about nanobots and uploading were all that survived of transhumanism, (146)

In his essay 'Accumulating Extinction', Justin McBrien claimed that the epoch to which capitalism had given rise was not the Anthropocene, but rather a variant of the capitalocene that he calls necrocene. He argues that 'the necrocene concept traces the relation between the material unfolding of extinction through capital and the history of its scientific inquiry' (McBrien in Moore, 2018: 118). As a systemic appropriation of nature, in other words, capitalism simultaneously destroys the organic resources it depends on (fossil fuels, for example), pollutes the biosphere, and develops new ways of appropriating the accumulated reserves of nature (nuclear power or genetic science, for example). Although McBrien's idea of the necrocene acknowledges the immense destructive potential that is put into play by technoscientific capitalism, it fails to recognize that the mechanisms through which it functions as a regime of extinction are part of a fluctuating, ideologically and aesthetically overdetermined, economy of death. The genealogical approach I have developed maintains that the consciousness of death that is characteristic of the neoliberal worldview is of a very specific type. Each of us is encouraged to believe in a kind of performative responsibility for his or her own life. Be fit, be adaptive, be healthy, etc. This level of personal responsibility for one's own existence, however, is contaminated by the growing sense of collective responsibility for the damage that is constantly being done to the natural environment. Thus, the logic of extinction that is endemic in technological capitalism is reproduced through the sleight of hand, the aesthetic figuration, by which the culture industries represent the effectiveness of individual action in the global economy. In McBrien's account of 'the necrocene' however, this logic of extinction operates outside of the phenomenology of death that haunts the neoliberal ideology of expanded life. The headlong rush to catastrophe that is the result of the affinity between capitalism and technoscience seems to be without pause, without reflection, and without opposition: its conatus appears to operate as a totalizing movement in which everything – culture, politics, and life itself – is drawn into the necrotic spiral of capitalization (McBrien in Moore, 2018: 120–124).<sup>4</sup>

In his work portending the possibility of human extinction, Thomas Moynihan in X-Risk suggests that "to escape extinction, we may need to reengineer everything— from sex to the stars."<sup>5</sup> Moynihan exposes the various threads of our capitalist civilization that have led to such a

conclusion: the primary contention of the book is that human extinction is a comparatively novel idea, one that remained entirely unavailable for the greater part of our existence as a species. Homo sapiens has been around for two or three hundred thousand years, yet it is only over the last couple of centuries that members of this species have begun to acknowledge that it might one day cease to exist forever. For reasons outlined below, during the larger part of the lifespan of humankind (roughly 99.9% of our time on Earth), this was an idea that remained totally beyond our conceptual grasp. (ibid.) Offering the optimistic solution he tells us historically, “we came to care about the possible extinction of the human precisely as we began to acknowledge the radical promise that makes humanity meaningful— the existential hope that comes from the conviction that we are here for a reason, that we have a vocation.” (ibid.) Of course, as you’ve seen in my previous essays this notion that we’re “here for a reason” is pure metaphysical surmise, a notion that comes from our religious and metaphysical heritage and gave us Leibniz’s notions of the PSR “principle of sufficient reason” and “best of all possible worlds” fictions. For such men the idea that we are here by accident, chance, and without any causal power other than the blind processes of “purposeless purpose” that generate our energetic cosmos seems ludicrous. For the pessimally inclined it’s the basic truth we live under in a universe without meaning or value, intent or purpose. But Moynihan’s vision is borne of the optimistic traditions that deny such nihilistic thought and instead offers us salvation:

*“...the emergence of this species-wide vocation, and hints at how it might be refurbished for the challenges of the turbulent epoch ahead. By looking at how others historically responded to the question ‘What is to be done?’ in the wake of the monumental discovery of human extinction, we can discern the outlines of what our response may need to look like during the next episode of cosmic history, should Earth-born intelligence make it out of its precarious phase of adolescence. And in the increasingly awe-inspiring ways in which thinkers have imagined humanity constructively responding to the discovery of X-risk by truly coming of age as a civilisation, we will glimpse the emergence of a new, secular doctrine of salvation (a ‘soteriology’) based purely on the modern naturalised, desacralised, and imperilled world view.” (ibid.)*

Moynihan’s notion of a secularized world view based on the naturalization of ancient religious doctrines is nothing new, as M.H. Abrams in his monumental study of this process once said that Natural Supernaturalism concerns the “secularization of inherited theological ideas and ways of thinking.”<sup>6</sup> From Rousseau through the Romantic poets of Germany and England set out, in various yet recognizably parallel ways, to reconstitute the grounds of hope and to announce the certainty, or at least the possibility, of a rebirth in which a renewed mankind will inhabit a renovated earth where he will find himself thoroughly at home. (Abrams, ibid.) One might say theirs was the first attempt at re-engineering the human species, offering a human realm devoid of the power and control of the god(s) of pagan and Christian civilization. In our time transhumanism, capitalism, and trends within the environmental movement all seem to be converging toward such a renewed project using technology as the soteriological device as their forbears did so through imagination, poetry, and philosophy. Transhumanism is a human-centric or anthropomorphic vision of the future in which mastery, control, and knowledge are still the

prominent tools of a humanist vision of the future.

Against such a humancentric vision there is the posthuman vision that with its delegitimization, disinhabitation, and decolonization of all anthropocentrism; and without the logics of the modernity's need for self-assertion, mastery, and control. As Francesca Ferando tells us in *Philosophical Posthumanism*:

*"Philosophical Posthumanism can be counted as a theoretical philosophy of the difference, which demystifies any ontological polarization through the postmodern practice of deconstruction. Therefore, we have defined it, at the modal level, as a post-centrism and a post-exclusivism: a "post" which is constantly opening possibilities and does not comply with stationary hierarchical views. This epistemic opening does not rely on assimilations to the same, but on acknowledgments of diversity, in tune with evolutionary processes, which manifest in dynamics of diversification. In this sense, evolution can be addressed as a technology of existence: "physis" ("nature" in Greek) and "techne" are co-constitutive domains." (186).*

I think Ferrando puts posthuman thought in the Deleuzean camp of difference while allowing for the more speculative frameworks of edge sciences and David Roden's more specific disconnection thesis in which "posthumans in very general terms as hypothetical wide "descendants" of current humans that are no longer human in consequence of some history of technological alteration" (§1.4). Speculative posthumanism is the claim that such beings might be produced as part of a feasible future history."<sup>7</sup> I tend to go along with David's subtractive suggestions, but with the caveat that what we are extracting is the inhuman core of the human from its investment in humanist metaphysics and religio-theocratic discourse. I'm sure that our technical dreams will continue to exceed technology itself, that science fiction and the fantastic will be drivers of minds incorporating visions that have even in the past as now guide young scientists and philosophers in their thoughts and thinking about the future.

1. Han, Byung-Chul. *Capitalism and the Death Drive*. Polity; 1st edition (August 2, 2021)
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3. Lushetich, Natasha. *The Aesthetics of Necropolitics*. (p. 143). Rowman & Littlefield Publishers (December 11, 2018)
4. Abbinnett, Ross. *The Neoliberal Imagination* (Media, Culture and Critique: Future Imperfect) (pp. 275-276). Taylor and Francis. Kindle Edition.
5. Moynihan, Thomas . *X-Risk*. MIT Press. Urbanomic (November 3, 2020)
6. Abrams, M. H.. *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*. W. W. Norton & Company. Kindle Edition.
7. Roden, David. *Posthuman Life: Philosophy at the Edge of the Human* (p. 105). Taylor and Francis.

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